

**EMPOWHER: HOW A WOMAN'S PRESENCE IN THE BOXING RING IS
RHETORICAL**

By

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis consists of two parts: a written analysis and a documentary, both of which explore women's experiences with boxing through storytelling. The activity of boxing has historically been male dominated, rendering women's voices and bodies invisible. This thesis analyses the ways in which women come together and engage in rhetorical action of sharing their individual and community experiences at a particular boxing gym, *Empower Lansing*. Utilizing storytelling as my methodology and documentary making as my medium, this thesis offers women's lived experiences in real time as they reflect on their relationships with boxing, while creating new meaning to what a boxing community can look and feel like. This thesis explores stories through lived experiences that have shaped my own understanding about what it means to rhetorically and materially feminize the boxing ring. The written portion of the thesis concludes with a call for rhetoric and writing studies to pay attention to women in the boxing ring and includes directions for the next phases of my research.

The documentary portion of this thesis is available at: URL HERE

<https://vimeo.com/440133595>

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This written portion of my thesis addresses various aspects that are not visible or recognizable within the documentary portion. This text serves as an overview to complement the film. Specifically, I describe my experience as a multimodal learner and why I chose documentary making as a medium, and then explain some of the specific editing decisions I made as I filmed, edited, and produced the documentary. I story my experience about what it was like to create EmpowHER, the documentary portion of my thesis. Next, I explain how cultural rhetorics and the importance of story anchored my work, followed by describing my approaches as informed by embodiment and feminist rhetorics. Next, I discuss some of my participants' stories from the boxing gym which then goes into my story about my upbringing. I conclude this written piece by discussing why scholars in Rhetoric and Composition should care about documentaries and about women boxing, and by describing the future of this project.

I argue that stories matter and multimodality offers us an opportunity to engage stories in different ways, through different voices and bodies. Simply writing about boxing and embodiment would be an injustice to this project. If you can only see text, you are missing part of the story. As we enact boxing differently, we also perform this activity differently--as community and apart from the masculine associations boxing typically has. We make boxing rhetorical because we feminize the sport in ways that challenge the status quo.

Multimodality and its Affordances

An interesting thing I have learned about myself since I began to pursue a graduate degree is that the way I process information differs greatly from many of my classmates. Initially, I became discouraged and felt like I did not belong in my MA program. However, instructors in WRAC saw my potential when I could not. I am fortunate to have people who believe in me, people who see my differences as strengths. These differences resulted in discovering that I am a multimodal learner. Working with film and text at the same time has proven beneficial to my learning and to my research. When one medium fails to do what I want it to, the other medium will pick up the slack. In Robert M. Emerson's book, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, he discusses why written text is essential to accompany visual and audio video: "Audio and video recordings, which seemingly catch and preserve almost everything occurring within an interaction, actually capture but a slice of ongoing social life" (9). Emerson's claim here makes me think about the editing process; I recorded way more than I could use. Throughout this process I had to trim and make decisions that could only communicate a part of the story. A conversation in the faculty library with Bump Halbritter helped ease some of my doubts about trimming the story. He assured me all of the story was important, but to focus on what fits right now. I could always go back to the rest later for different projects. Even if I had not made those editorial decisions, information would still be missing. There is always more going on in a scene that goes beyond just seeing and hearing. This is why both written content and video context have become a vital part of my thesis.

On the other hand, written text does not capture the story in the ways video will. Emerson tells us "a video recording provides a valuable record of words actually uttered and gestures actually made" (10). A video can invite the audience into the story in real time, even when it is

pre-recorded. I can prompt you to feel a specific way about a situation through lighting, music, and participants' non-verbal cues. In Bump Halbritter and Julie Lindquist's article, "Time, Lives, and Videotape: Operationalizing Discovery in Scenes of Literacy Sponsorship," they discuss the benefits of composing with video, saying that "video footage can be approached as data in several ways: as an audiovisual record of places, events, or conversations; as a piece of narrative text; as a record of choices made within a particular kind of rhetorical work: and so on" (175-176). My intention for the documentary is to use audio-visual storytelling for my participants to communicate their own experiences with boxing and community, rather than me speaking for them. It is important for each person to tell their own story with their own words. In this written portion, I can offer context about some of the rhetorical moves I make in editing and shaping the documentary and why I make them. Additionally, in this written portion, there is more room for me to further address how a woman's body in the boxing ring is rhetorical. In the documentary, I hope to *show* how a woman's body in the boxing ring is rhetorical; in this written portion, I hope to *tell* how it is.

By choosing to create a multimodal thesis, I hope to connect with a wide audience, including audiences inside and outside of academia. For the film, my goal is to make sure all of my participants can fully engage with what is going on and feel very much a part of this project. The written portion is more for an academic audience. By composing through different mediums beyond standard text, I can also speak to various learning styles across academia. Multimodality offers something for every kind of learner to engage with and grow from.

My Learning Journey

I did not begin to work with film until I was in my thirties and this was largely due to the fact that I did not previously have access to the technologies that MSU has to offer. When I did discover that documentary making offered a different way to tell story than I was accustomed to, there was no going back. The first camera I worked with was an old Canon I borrowed from the Writing Center. A fellow student from my cohort, Jared Milburn, gave me a five-minute tutorial to get comfortable with a camera. It took me another few months to learn to use a camera properly. I then upgraded to a Sony RX 10, which became my future camera of choice for all of my projects. The Wells Hall film lab provided me the resources and access I needed from cameras to lighting equipment, however, my learning process was trial and error. I edited everything with iMovie. Although MSU offers computer labs with Adobe Premiere, my schedule did not really work to my advantage when it came to the labs being available. I was also not that comfortable with Adobe software yet.

I also learned how to be a good interviewer. Before I took a class with Casey Miles on digital video production, I worked with an undergraduate student, Kara Headley, who taught me important skills, such as how to set a scene, where to position interviewees, how to be a more in-depth interviewer, and to always have a backup plan in case of technological issues (we ran into some of those issues with one of our microphones, luckily, Kara had another means to voice record).

Teresa Williams and I met regularly to work on editing my video. They taught me helpful tricks to navigate iMovie. Eventually I became comfortable enough where they did not have to keep reteaching me how to do things. Although I had the technical tips and tricks down, I

still met with them so I could get a second opinion about editing decisions I made throughout the film.

Jared Milburn provided the music for the film. I knew a long time ago I wanted to involve him in my thesis to some capacity. One day I was listening to his song, “*Hit or Miss*,” and I just knew *that* was the song. Not only did he provide the song, along with a copy of the lyrics, but he also provided an audio file where he talks about the inspiration behind the song, which I have included after the ending credits of the documentary, after the song ends. I decided not to include how his lyrics resonated with me because I would rather readers hear Jared talk about this song for himself. After reading this written portion and watching the film in its entirety, I hope it is clear how his words connect to my story.

My Story

I situate my work in cultural rhetorics, embodiment, and feminist rhetorics. Before I share my story as a boxer, I need to share my story as a graduate student and Rhetoric and Composition scholar. I want to paint a picture of my first semester in graduate school. I did not fit in. I had a difficult time connecting with my classmates: First, on a learning level, then on a personality level, because my greatest passions fell outside of academia, resulting in not having much in common with my peers. Eventually, I discovered a way to connect those passions to my academic journey. Prior to that discovery, I just felt like something was missing. I went searching for that missing piece of myself and found it in a community I have come to love like family. According to Malea Powell et al.,

In practice, cultural rhetorics scholars investigate and understand meaning-making as it is situated in specific cultural communities. And when we say “cultural communities,” we mean any place/space where groups organize under a set of shared beliefs and practices. (4)

These cultural communities can be anywhere and I found mine at a boxing gym called Empower Lansing. In early Fall of 2018, I arrived at Empower for their grand opening party and was immediately welcomed and embraced. I, a stranger, a non-native Michigander, was welcomed with open arms into this space. Not only was this space dominated by women, but one of the first observations I made was that there were many different kinds of bodies present in this space with me. There was this diverse group of women ranging in age, cultural backgrounds, body types, and skill levels. **Empower was unlike any gym I had experienced before.**

My experience in other boxing gyms has been walking into male dominated spaces where I felt un-welcomed because the boxing ring and boxing gyms are typically associated with a

particular idea of masculinity, for example, when an individual pictures what a boxer looks like, it is more often than not associated with a male boxer. In other words, I was so used to a particular idea of male gym-ness, one that I had witnessed over and over--that my body in these spaces felt peripheral. Judith Butler states, “The normative force of performativity-- its power to establish what qualifies as ‘being,’ -- works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well” (140). Who gets to decide what qualifies as “being” though? It is typically the dominant culture, with gender being one example. When I reflect on the normative constraints of many gyms, I think about a particular notion of maleness. What does that look like? Through my experience with the norm, I would observe an overwhelming number of male participants. More often than not, those male participants would control the spotlight, especially in boxing gyms. When I see boxers in the media, it is typically the males who are spotlighted. I think about Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky* films and the kickboxer films, starring Jean-Claude Van Damme. Society conditions people to perform particular roles according to their reproductive organs. From the moment a child is born, they enter into a society that has certain expectations based on their biological sex. However, because gender is not innate, by choosing not to perform their assigned gender roles, individuals take power away from the dominant culture. More often than not, those who refuse to participate in the “norm” are excluded.

Upon entering those other gyms, I observed only or two women at a time, and they were treated differently than the male boxers. The men were given extra attention, while the women were left to basically fend for themselves. Historically, women have been excluded from boxing; it was not even legal for women to box competitively in the United States until the 1990s. On the other hand, the women at my boxing gym resisted those normative constraints through challenging the status quo about what and who defines what a boxer looks like. Our very

participation in sparring, jabbing, and running through tabata drills feminized the space; our challenge to the ways in which the boxing ring is historically masculinized was an act of resistance--we acted to associate boxing with women and with women in the ring. By challenging gender discourses and feminizing boxing we created three things: a feminist space, a brave space, and a site of resistance. By resisting these normative constraints, not only are women's bodies rhetorical, but so are our actions through our bodies.

Men have explained to me how the only way I could become a good boxer was if I fought with aggression, a trait I associate with toxic masculinity. These same men did not take me, a woman, seriously. These individuals thought they knew more about my body than I did. I politely call bullshit. Words that have stuck with me throughout my graduate school *journey* are from Maureen Johson, Daisy Levy, and Maria Novotny, who said, "To think about rhetoric, we must think about bodies. To do this means also to articulate how scholars' own bodies have intimately informed our disciplinary understanding of rhetoric"(39). Systematic sexual oppression informs my embodied experiences. I cannot do this kind of work without thinking about bodies. I think about my own physical body all of the time--its capabilities, its limitations, and my body in relation to everyone and everything in my life. There is how I see my body, and then there is how other people see my body. As a woman and a Queer person, my body is constantly under attack. I cannot discuss my identity as a woman without also discussing my identity as a Queer woman. Sara Ahmed states, "I want to think of lesbian feminism as a willfulness archive made up and made out of our own experiences of struggling against what we come up against" (222). By *willfulness archive*, I think she means storying those individual experiences, specifically in regard to our continuous struggles as women. Although Ahmed was writing about lesbian feminism, the women boxers and I are creating our own willfulness archive

by sharing our experiences as boxers in a space historically defined by masculinity; in the documentary and this written portion, I attempt to capture and share some of this archive. Further, Ahmed's words are a call to action to have those difficult conversations and to hold oppressors accountable, even when we are seen as killjoys by some people. It is important to keep the archive going because it keeps Lesbian Feminism alive; it is important to keep the archive going because it gives voice to women's boxing, voices that would be rendered invisible in the dominant conversations about boxing.

When an individual is confronted with dangerous circumstances, the flight or fright instincts kick in. This was me just a few years ago, but not anymore. Now my fight instinct kicks in and I have become a different person since I took up boxing, a better version of myself. Ahmed also shares, "When a world does not give us standing, to stand is to stand against that world. And when a world does not give us standing, we have to create other ways of being in the world" (223). In other words, the only way to change the world on a larger scale is through small action to change it on a smaller scale. This is where communities come into play. We create and take part in a community of boxers, and through our actions create an atmosphere that says it is okay to be a woman who does this activity. My space to stand is in the gym. By participating in boxing, I found my other way of being in this world. At Empower, I found a space where women boxers enacted resistance. This contradicted many things society deemed as inappropriate or unladylike, where women were challenging gender discourses everyday by doing something we were told was for men. In a way, we, as women, performed boxing differently. Our very bodies feminized the space in that we were physically visible to any passersby. We learned the skills usually associated with maleness and aggression, and made those skills our own. Rather than let anger or aggression or other masculine-privileged acts guide us, we learned boxing through

practicing radical love, love for the activity, and love for each other. We had to allow ourselves to be vulnerable together in order to grow. This feminist action could not have happened individually; it took a community of women in a space, oriented to an activity, acting together, to rhetorically transform the boxing ring.

Women Boxers' Voices and Stories

By joining this boxing community, these women and I were able to take back the power. Only we controlled our bodies and only we decided what we were capable of. More importantly, for the first time, we were the ones controlling the narrative, which leads me to the documentary portion of my thesis. Ashlie discusses how the media portrays boxing gyms as very male dominated spaces. She says, "And it's not really a safe space for women that are interested." However, after joining Empower, she realized it could be a safe space for women after all. Mandy discusses how Empower is different from other gyms. She says, "One of the things I've always thought about here is there is not any kind of fat shaming." She talks about her experience with exercise videos where the trainers set unrealistic body goals for people, while shaming. To my friends and I, it is not about having the perfect body. We get to decide our own fitness goals and in this space we have a say in what we want for ourselves. Our trainers understand each of us and our individual needs. We get to decide. We have control over our own bodies, no one else does.

There was strength in this community that those other gyms severely lacked. I had my doubts before joining Empower. I expected not to fit in and be surrounded by young people, all with similar body types who excelled at boxing. I expected the boxing gym to be an overwhelming male to female ratio. I expected to be disappointed again because this was the type of environment I had become accustomed to. I am glad my assumptions were wrong-- because in those moments, I learned things could be different, not just for me, but also for the other women in my documentary. All of these women were also searching for community. We made that community together, and with the men at the gym who rejected performing the

traditional role of male boxers and boxing. Upon joining Empower, for the first time in my life, I felt safe. Being a part of this community gives me strength.

What I hope readers take from this story are three key things that also resonate across what I discuss below, the importance of: 1) storying our embodied individual experiences, 2) storying our embodied collective experiences, and 3) articulating that our bodies are rhetorical, specifically in the context of the boxing ring.

My Upbringing

I left out my story from the documentary. I wanted to give space to all of my amazing participants to speak about their experiences. I only speak briefly about how I got into boxing in the documentary, so I share more of my story here. Something I need my audience to understand about me is that my past made me who I am. I have been a victim of sexual oppression my entire life.

I grew up in two different households, yet one house. On my father's side, my Puerto Rican side, toxic masculine traits were celebrated. Men don't cry, boys will be boys, it is cool to be a player. As a girl, he expected women to be in the kitchen, do activities that were more feminine, dress more feminine, and I was sure as shit going to burn in Hell for loving women. (I am happy to share that my mother, who is also a feminist, divorced him and made space for me to be me.) For the record, I never listened to my father. I fought with the boys, dressed how I wanted, and intentionally did not take up cooking until later in life. How this relates to boxing is because I am a woman, and with that identity, people treated me differently. Earlier I discussed my experiences in other boxing gyms and in boxing rings--where male aggression was the norm and women did not have a place. I experienced this same placelessness at home, , compounded by my father's idea of what and who I was supposed to be. As a woman, I felt that other people wanted to control my body, both at home and beyond/outside of my home.

Growing up, my father was very abusive. I never knew how to act around him because anything could set him off. I lived most of my childhood in fear. Ahmed's words ring clear in my ears: "To become a girl is to learn to expect such advances, to modify your behavior in accordance"(26). When Ahmed discusses modifying our behaviors, I think about rape culture. Often, victims of rape are expected to dress a particular way to avoid being desirable, while the

perpetrators are not held accountable a lot of the time. More often than not, society expects women to change their behavior, as if it is our fault that we attract vulgar advances from the opposite sex, as if it is our fault if dad had a bad day or was coming down from a high.

When I was young my dad beat the crap out of me. One time he hit me so hard that he left a handprint on my leg that was still visible for weeks. The Division of Family and Youth Services (DYFS) came to my school and I told them that he hurt me. When I came home, he freaked out and said that he never hit me and made me feel like I was in the wrong for being honest. In the future, I lied to cover his ass.

As an adult, I grew braver. I decided enough was enough. One night my father threatened my mother in front of me. He went after her and I stopped him. It was one of the scariest moments in my life, but I will never forget the words he uttered next. He said, “You are a fucking F*gg*t and if I were Gay, I would kill myself.” From that moment forward, I was no longer afraid, I was angry. I needed to find a healthy way to channel that anger so I did not become like him. Ahmed also says, “Feminism can allow you to reinhabit not only your own past but also your own body” (30). Reflecting on my past trauma gave me fuel to work through my shit and heal. For most of my life, my body did not feel like my own. At a certain point, I took up fighting, martial arts, and kickboxing and my father stopped messing with me. It could have been because he was proud since he was a boxer at one point in his life, or maybe because the tables had turned. Maybe he feared me, a woman, who challenged gender expectations by doing the opposite of what was expected of me. Maybe he was intimidated by the strong woman I was becoming. Learning to fight offered me a way to take back my life, confront my fears, and come out of my father’s abuse and society’s stereotyping of how I should be stronger.

Last summer, my friend and I were walking my date to her car in East Lansing and a man came up to us and grabbed my date by her hair. My fight instinct kicked in immediately. At a first glance, he might observe what my body signals: small, Queer, woman, and slight. I threw the man. He grabbed me and my friend then pushed him. He saw he was outnumbered and backed off. Little did he know that two out of the three of us were boxers. I felt powerful, not just because I stood up to this man who meant to demean and hurt us, but because I knew that my girls had my back; we always have each other's backs. This is community; this is the community that we built in the gym and we carry with us. This man saw three women and assumed we were weak. He read our bodies a particular way, and we actively disrupted that reading by using the tools we learned in the boxing ring.

Conclusion

Trying to finish my thesis work during a pandemic was my biggest challenge because it prevented me from being able to film the introduction that I wanted. The introduction I had planned was to film myself in the gym at night. There would be closeups of my hand/forearm wraps and then me in a hood, shadow boxing to Jared's song "*Hit or Miss*." What ended up actually happening was that I had to shoot the scene in my garage and in my basement with a phone. Although I had limited access to film equipment and lighting, I was able to borrow some lighting from a friend. I still could not get the quality footage I would have liked. I did what I could with the resources I had at hand, such as cardboard to cover the basement windows. In the introduction, viewers can see me putting a mask on. Without using words, my audience should be able to understand when this project was filmed. I also added a clip of me jump roping to warm up. The clip ends with me shadow boxing into the camera and the screen goes black, where we can see the words ***EmpowHER*** on the screen.

My health was not doing so great since the pandemic started. I lost a lot of time to work and when I had time, it was tough to motivate myself to do the work. I was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy, a temporary paralysis of the facial nerves, due to stress. Then I had issues with my eyes and looking at screens was literally very painful. I needed to pause my work in order to take care of myself first. When I was mostly healed, I was determined to complete the documentary, write this written portion, and prove why my research is crucial to the field.

It is our duty as Rhetoric and Composition scholars to care about women and boxing because Cultural Rhetorics, embodiment, and feminism encourages us to give voice to those who have for too long, been silenced. Without these stories, we, as women, are rendered unrecognizable, powerless, and weak in this hegemonic society. Without the stories I have

shared through my documentary and in this written portion, we, as women, are rendered unrecognizable or even invisible in the boxing ring.

To address the title of my project, “How is a woman's presence in a boxing ring rhetorical?,” her presence is rhetorical in that her very body and her very presence challenge the status quo. Further, our bodies, together, are rhetorical in that we, as a community, created a feminist space together. Creating space is rhetorical action, as is the ways in which we worked communally to resist dominant norms about bodies, masculinities, and boxing.

By doing this work in our field, we can make visible people who have been unseen historically or who are erased today. This project also presents the benefits of multimodality. Our field already does significant research on multimodality and that incorporates multimodal tools. I think everyone in the field of rhetoric and composition could benefit from storytelling using different mediums. If we are not out there doing this work, then what kind of message does this send to the rest of the world? I will continue this work until I go to the grave.

My next steps for this project have shifted in the face of Covid 19. My gym, for example, was fortunate enough to not fully close its doors. The owners kept things going by offering online zoom classes, which presented its own challenges. As for my participants, some of them kept up with working out regularly, while others stopped exercising. Online does not work for everyone. Although I can speak from personal experience that I thrive when I am physically surrounded by community, I stopped going to the zoom classes and started working out regularly at home. This gave me more time to get to know myself and improve my boxing greatly. In the future, I would like to re-interview my participants about life during and after Covid 19 to learn how everyone coped with these major shifts in their lives. This follow-up project will be about boxing and gender and empowerment but also about the practice of self-care.

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